

cooked to look like the waiting times were not as long as they were, allegations such as those at the Veterans' Administration hospital in Phoenix, where allegedly there were secret waiting lists where 40 veterans died waiting to get health care, and the secret waiting list was being created to make the backlog appear not as serious as it was.

As we discuss and debate all the numbers on wait times and backlogs, it is important as always, whenever we are talking about statistics and numbers, to remember these are real human beings and these are our veterans with real individual stories.

They represent people such as Dale Richardson, who is a Vietnam veteran from East Texas who died of cancer after reportedly waiting 2 months to hear back from the VA about scheduling chemotherapy treatments. They represent people such as Thomas Breen, a Navy veteran who, similar to Mr. Richardson, died of cancer after a 2-month period in which he reportedly waited in vain to hear back from the VA about an appointment time. They also represent people such as Edward Laird whose story was written up in the Los Angeles Times this last weekend. Mr. Laird is a Navy veteran, age 76, who discovered a couple of unusual marks on his nose, and so he went to the doctor at the Phoenix VA hospital to get it checked out, and according to the Los Angeles Times, the doctor said he needed a biopsy, but it took almost 2 years before Mr. Laird was allowed to see a VA specialist, and when he finally did get to see the specialist, he was told that the biopsy was unnecessary and so it wasn't done.

Mr. Laird found it hard to believe, but that is what they told him. Unfortunately, by the time he got the VA hospital in Phoenix to agree to see him—the situation with his nose which he could tell as simply a layman had gotten worse—Mr. Laird was ultimately diagnosed with cancer and literally half of his nose had to be taken off because of cancer.

As Mr. Laird told the Los Angeles Times: "I have no nose, and I have to put an ice cream stick up my nose at night so I can breathe."

I will just mention one other story from the Phoenix system. Earlier this month a woman named Kim Sertich told the Arizona Republic that her father received such poor care at the Phoenix VA that she was forced to pay for private care until he ultimately died in 2011. In her own words, she said:

Whenever anyone asked how my father died, I say, "From being in the VA hospital." The icing on the cake is when I received a letter of condolence from the hospital, and they had the wrong name for my dad.

It is obvious from anecdote to anecdote, from the drip, drip, drip that then turns into a flood, there is something terribly wrong with the health care and the way the Veterans' Administration is administering 589,000 claims, with more than half of them backlogged, according to the standards and

criteria of the Veterans' Administration.

We have known that the backlog has been a problem for years. Indeed, we have tried to come together in a bipartisan way and legislatively through the national defense authorization bill, where we added money. We have added resources to the VA system. Obviously, we have not gotten to the bottom of the problem. Part of it, I am afraid, is systemic, and some of it, sadly, is part of the bureaucratic culture at the VA, where accountability is unknown. You don't get credit for doing a good job. You don't get demerits for doing a bad job. There is no accountability, and this is what you get without accountability.

Not only is the VA system failing to provide our military heroes with reliable health care that they deserve, there are also news reports that the VA across the country has been falsifying appointment data in hopes of covering up wait times. Sadly, some of those allegations have come from my State. We have allegations of data manipulation of these appointment times in Austin, where I live, and Harlingen, in South Texas, and San Antonio and Waco.

For that matter, a former VA doctor named Richard Krugman told the Washington Examiner that up to 15,000 VA patients in South Texas were either denied colonoscopies,—of course, those are cancer screening examinations—or they were forced to endure long, pointless delays. Dr. Krugman fears that many of those patients simply died awaiting their cancer screening or awaiting treatment. If the problems at the VA are just a fraction as serious as what they appear from the news reports that we see day in and day out or the stories I recounted today, if they are a fraction as severe as what they appear to be, we have a national scandal of the highest order.

Let's be clear about what is happening. U.S. military veterans are literally dying because of bureaucratic failures and in some instances bureaucratic fraud. There is simply no excuse for what reportedly happened in Harlingen, Phoenix or in any of the cities where veterans or veterans officials have made their allegations. Yet it disturbs me that I am not sure the President is taking this with the requisite urgency. Apparently it is in the talking points to say, when somebody raises this scandal—I think Jay Carney said the President is mad as hell. That is what Eric Shinseki said when he testified before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee last week, but that is, frankly, not good enough. We need less rhetoric and more action.

For starters, the President has still not demanded the resignation of the person in charge of the Department of Veterans Affairs. We all admire General Shinseki for his service in the U.S. Army, but he on his watch has presided over some of the biggest scandals at the VA in history. It is painfully clear,

no matter what you think about General Shinseki—and I admire him for his service in the Army, but it is painfully clear the VA needs a fresh new set of eyes, new leadership, in order to recover, reform, and regain the confidence of America's veterans.

President Obama still stands by his VA Secretary while nothing seems to be happening. Yes, we read about where there is an audit here, audit there, but we need top-to-bottom review and reform and we need to see the VA once again regain America's confidence.

It is not just me who is saying this. One of the largest veterans affairs organizations in America, the American Legion, has called on Secretary Shinseki to step down and new leadership to be appointed.

Here is just another example of the administration's unserious response to this scandal. The person who has been nominated to serve as the VA Under Secretary of Health, Dr. Murawsky, currently oversees a VA health care system in Illinois that was recently rocked by all-too-familiar allegations of secret waiting lists. I note that Dr. Murawsky spent 2 years as the direct supervisor of Sharon Helman, who worked in the Great Lakes Health Care System before becoming Director of the Phoenix system. As we all know, Ms. Helman was placed on administrative leave after the Phoenix VA was charged with creating secret waiting lists of its own.

For these reasons I asked President Obama to withdraw Dr. Murawsky's nomination. We need a clean break. We need new leadership, a fresh set of eyes, and we need a sense of urgency in what is a growing scandal. As I said a moment ago, if even a fraction of these failures and abuses were true, it would represent a national scandal of the highest order. It is not enough for the VA Secretary to say, I am "mad as hell." That doesn't solve anybody's problems. That doesn't fix what is broken in the VA health care system. What America's veterans want and deserve is bold reform and new leadership. President Obama has the power to make that happen, and it is long past time for him to use it.

I yield the floor.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 5:30 p.m. will be equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees.

The Senator from Michigan.

THE MIDDLE CLASS

Ms. STABENOW. Madam President, I am here to talk about the future of our country and the future of our middle class, which I know the Presiding Officer cares deeply about as well.

A few years ago in Michigan something quite extraordinary happened. In 1914 a man named Henry Ford did

something that all his business friends said was crazy. He doubled the wages of his workers to \$5 a day. The headlines at that time showed that those on Wall Street literally thought he was going to ruin the economy, and everyone said he was going to go under. It was the craziest thing they had ever seen.

Exactly the opposite happened. In fact, there were stories a month after he did this—by the way, tens of thousands of people showed up for these jobs. Around the plant there were newspaper interviews about how all the small businesses had seen their profits double and how they were hiring new people for the hotdog stand or the clothing entrepreneur who was selling shoes and suits, and so on. Small businesses said that it had been wonderful for them.

We all know what happened to Henry Ford. He went on to become one of the wealthiest men of his generation by doing the right thing and understanding that we all do better if everybody has a fair shot to make it and that he would do better as a business person if everybody had a shot. In fact, we are very proud, and we believe we started the middle class in Detroit, MI.

We celebrate success in this country. We also understand that we are all in this together—our family, our community, and our country. We can do great things by ourselves, but ultimately what makes us great as Americans is that we are connected and in it together. That is the idea on which America was built. Everybody contributes their fair share, and we give everybody a fair shot to work hard and get ahead in life.

Just like Henry Ford, we understand that the economy is not working—our country is not as strong as it could be—unless it is working for everyone and not just the wealthy few.

In fact, Henry Ford showed that you can become very wealthy yourself by doing the right thing. We now have choices to make. Unfortunately, today a small number of incredibly rich people are doing the opposite of what Henry Ford did. They are literally trying to buy a government that works only for them at the expense of every other American.

The Supreme Court's outrageous Citizens United decision and other decisions that have followed have paved the way for multimillionaires to spend secret money on fake front groups and hundreds of millions of dollars on television and radio ads to twist the facts or just make things up so they can impose their own extreme views on our country.

I want to speak about the two people who are at the forefront of this effort and what their views mean for the people I represent in Michigan, the people in Wisconsin, and the future of middle class families all across America. The Koch brothers, two petrochemical magnates, are reportedly now worth over \$100 billion. Last month, their fortune grew by \$1.3 billion in just 1 day. How

many average Americans would work a lifetime—added up together across the country—to try to reach the \$1.3 billion they made in a day? They have built what the Washington Post called “a far-reaching operation of unrivaled complexity, built around a maze of groups that cloak its donors” in secrecy. This “maze of groups” raised \$400 million in 2012.

Just last week we found out one of the groups, Americans for Prosperity, plans to spend \$125 million in secret, undisclosed money in this year's election alone—\$125 million on people who support their views of America.

One expert on taxes and political groups, a professor at Notre Dame Law School, said he had never seen anything like the network of Koch groups before. He said:

It is designed to make it opaque as to where the money is coming from and where the money is going . . . It would only be worth it if you were spending the kind of dollars the Koch brothers are, because this was not cheap.

These are front groups that pose as senior citizen groups, environmental groups, and veterans groups. I could go on and on about all of the fake groups through which they are funneling money.

The Koch brothers may be able to hide their money and hide behind shadowy groups, but they can't hide their radical views from the American people. Let me be clear. It is not only me who is saying they are being radical. Charles Koch described his own views as “radical.”

Senator SANDERS recently spoke on the Senate floor about some of the Koch brothers' extreme anti-middle-class views. I want to thank him for shedding light on some ideas that I know the vast majority of Americans disagree with and many of us find frightening, frankly, for the future of our country.

We don't have to guess what these views are since David Koch ran for Vice President on the Libertarian ticket in 1980 and loudly trumpeted them for all to see. What did David Koch promise to do when he ran for the second-highest office in the country? He promised to end the “fraudulent, virtually bankrupt, and increasingly oppressive Social Security system,” which has lifted a generation of seniors out of poverty and given them dignity as they have moved on over the years.

He promised to abolish Medicare and Medicaid. By the way, the majority of Medicaid funds is used on low-income seniors in nursing homes. He promised to get rid of the post office. He didn't suggest that it be cut it back to 5 days a week, he wanted to get rid of it. I suppose you can deliver the mail yourself or go hire somebody from someplace to somehow deal with the mail. What about trying to get your Social Security check? I guess it doesn't matter. Since he thinks you should not get Social Security or Medicare, it doesn't matter if you get that check as a senior.

He proposed to abolish the Environmental Protection Agency—the agency that makes sure we have clean air to breathe and safe water we can drink. For those of us in the Great Lakes region, we have the blessing of being able to fish and boat and have the beauty of the Great Lakes.

He promised to end all programs for children and seniors, low-income veterans, and repeal all taxation—no funding for the police department, fire department, roads, military, and veterans.

We just heard Senator CORNYN—and I agree with him—talk about our veterans and the great concern we have with what is happening to our veterans. The people supporting our colleagues on the other side of the aisle, the top two donors, said there should be no taxation and that we should get rid of the minimum wage. Remember how Henry Ford became one of the wealthiest men of his generation. He helped build the middle class by doubling their wages. By the way, if we were using Henry Ford's formula, the minimum wage would be close to \$15 right now.

The Koch brothers don't want a minimum wage, Social Security or Medicare. They don't want help for anyone. They expect people to go out and earn \$1.3 billion in a day and purchase whatever they need. Seniors, children, people with disabilities, including our veterans, would be left with no support, and, of course, no taxes for the Koch brothers and their big-shot friends.

This is truly a radical agenda. Here is the truly shocking part. The Koch brothers' agenda, which, again, Charles Koch himself proudly calls a “radical” agenda, is exactly the agenda we are seeing emerge from the Republican House of Representatives right now. Too many Members in our Senate Republican caucus want to privatize Social Security and gamble seniors' money away in the stock market. They want to eliminate Medicare as we know it. They passed the Ryan budget, which does that. They want to privatize the post office.

They passed a budget that guts efforts to help Americans in need or invest in the future of education and innovation. This is not what was said in 1980. This is what has passed and is being promoted right now, which is why they are putting so much money into the elections. Their agenda is being promoted right now, which they themselves call radical.

They refuse to join us in giving Americans a raise so that people who work 40 hours a week in a full-time job and make minimum wage—by the way, a majority of them are women who are raising children—are at least above poverty level and have a fair shot to get ahead.

We also don't have to guess how this radical, “I've got mine and you're on your own” Koch brothers agenda works in practice. We have seen how this plays out in Michigan.

In Gaylord, MI—beautiful northern Michigan—hundreds of workers used to work at a plant making particleboard—that is, until the Koch brothers bought their company, closed the plant, and left town. Instead of good-paying jobs that paid workers \$15 to \$20 an hour so they could with their family enjoy the great outdoors in Michigan and send their kids to college—jobs that gave workers a fair shot to get ahead—the Koch brothers left behind rubble and scrap metal. But that is not all the Koch brothers left behind.

Imagine you are outside with your family—or even inside your apartment or home—and suddenly you see a giant cloud of toxic black dust blowing towards you. It is piling up, and later you discover that this black dust includes a toxic metal that is believed to cause cancer. Imagine you own a restaurant and are forced to sweep up the same toxic dust from your patio, and you have to worry about what it is doing to your pregnant wife and unborn child. This is not something out of a Charles Dickens' novel or a story about the pollution in China today. This actually happened to the people in Detroit. Why? Because a company owned by the Koch brothers decided to illegally store piles of petcoke—a byproduct of refined, dirty tar sands oil—alongside the Detroit River. These piles were up to four stories high and piled up next to where people lived.

Just the other day I read a story about the exact same thing happening to people in Chicago. Another company owned by the Koch brothers is storing giant piles of petcoke in a residential area, which is something I know Senator DURBIN is very concerned about. It doesn't stop there.

Last Wednesday, Senator LEVIN, Congressman FRED UPTON from Kalamazoo, and I wrote to the Environmental Protection Agency about a toxic waste site in Kalamazoo, MI. We want to make sure it finally gets cleaned up. Guess who owns that toxic waste site and hasn't cleaned it up for years and years. That is right, the Koch brothers.

We have come together in this country and decided that it is not fair for the rest of us to have to breathe dirty air and drink dirty water so a multi-billionaire can have an even bigger profit. The Koch brothers, however, whose companies have been fined numerous times, apparently think it is just fine to pollute our air and our water and then say to every American: You are on your own; you clean it up.

The New York Times reported this weekend that David Koch even ran ads calling for the complete deregulation of the energy industry. Can we believe it. A billionaire oilman who thinks there should be no rules for Big Oil at the expense of the public.

So whether it is clean air and clean water rules, whether it is Medicare, whether it is Social Security, funding for seniors in nursing homes through Medicaid, other vital services that

keep the promise of the American dream within reach for every American, the Koch brothers want to get rid of those things in order to help themselves and their powerful friends. They want to rig the game in their favor. They are trying very hard to do that, with hundreds of millions of dollars of secret money and phony groups. They are willing to use their billions to create a government that works for them—just them and their friends. Heads they win; tails the rest of America loses.

That is not what this country is about. We need to stop this assault on our democracy and our middle class by passing a constitutional amendment to get this secret money out of our elections. That is why I am so proud to join in supporting and cosponsoring an amendment sponsored by Senator TOM UDALL that so many of our caucus are supporting because we need to make it clear that this is not acceptable in a democracy. In the meantime, though, we need to make sure the American people understand the real agenda behind the front groups and the secret money. That is why I am here today. That is why our majority leader and others speak out. It is because it matters. It is the money promoting the agenda, the money promoting actions such as closing plants and petcoke going into the rivers in our neighborhoods.

It is an agenda that is not the agenda of the American people. In America, everyone deserves a fair shot to work hard and get ahead—everybody. It is not about rigging the game for a few. People shouldn't be able to buy all the rules of the game by putting secret money and front groups out there and saying things that aren't true and getting people in there whom they know will just work for their own radical agenda. That is not what America is about. We have too many people barely holding on to the middle class, struggling to get into the middle class, and all they want is a fair shot to make it. That is what we are about. That is what we are fighting for every single day.

I see my colleague on the floor who is offering a constitutional amendment that would address this issue of getting the light of day on the money in politics in our great country. I wish to again, in his presence, commend Senator UDALL for doing that, and I urge my colleagues to come together. What is happening right now with the money is the worst of America, not the best of America. We can do better than that. People expect us to do better than that. I am going to continue with my colleagues in the Democratic caucus to fight to make sure that happens.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The deputy whip.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I thank my colleague from Michigan for

her statement because it raises a theme which we really need to focus on in the Senate.

I went back to Illinois this last weekend, traveling around, as I have over the last several months. After a person has been in this world of politics for a while, it doesn't take long to sit down with most gatherings and crowds and kind of test out ideas. People either fold their arms and look at the ceiling and pray you stop talking or they start getting on the edge of their chair and listening. What I have found over the last several weeks is that everywhere I go, everywhere in the State—downstate small towns, medium-sized cities, and the city of Chicago—there is one issue that has everybody sitting up and listening. The issue is student loans.

We wonder why that issue would have so many people interested. It is because 34 million Americans are paying back student loans now. In the State of Illinois, there are 1.7 million people paying back student loans—1.7 million. Fifteen percent of our population is paying back student loans. There is more student loan debt in America today than credit card debt.

Some of the loans these students are taking out to go to school are outrageous. There is no other way to describe it. These young people, 19 or 20 years old, are sitting there at the desk at the college as someone is shoving a piece of paper toward them for them to sign saying: Well, if you sign up here for your loans, you can start classes on Monday. That young man or woman, who has been told since they were just a little kid to go to college, go to college, go to college, signs on and heads to class. At the end of the day those students end up \$20,000 in debt, \$30,000 in debt, and more—dramatically more. Many of them don't have a clue about the indebtedness they are getting into to go to school. Some of them don't know they are being lured into these for-profit colleges and universities. Sadly, too many of them are worthless. Students are signing up for these for-profit colleges and universities thinking they are real schools, thinking it is just like the University of Wisconsin, just like the University of Illinois. No, it isn't. It is a business, and it is a business that makes its money off of kiting the cost of tuition for students and, if they can stick around to finish, handing them a worthless diploma. How does a student know this? Well, the honest answer is they don't until it is too late.

Hannah Moore has been at my press conferences twice. She went to one of these awful for-profit schools and ended up with \$120,000 in debt for a bachelor's degree and a worthless diploma. She couldn't get a job. Her debt is now closer to \$150,000. She can't pay it. Here she is barely 30 years old with over \$100,000 in debt for a worthless diploma. That is the extreme, but for 10 percent of the students graduating from high school in America today,